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A Study of Caste Hegemony and Poverty in Suraj Yengde's *Caste Matters*

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Abstract— *Dalit literature is human literature that questions caste prejudices and the stigma of untouchability enforced on Dalits. Dalit writings are inspired by the anti-caste struggle of Phule, Ambedkar, and Periyar, who challenged Brahmanic principles of inequality and helped to form a democratic society based on the philosophy of equality, liberty, and fraternity. In this light, the paper critically explores Yengde's memories narrated in fragments in his book Caste Matters, which examines his social experiences with caste and poverty. The writings and speeches of Dr. Ambedkar will be used as a theoretical framework to examine how institutionalized caste hierarchies maintain and normalise poverty and discrimination.*

Keywords— ***Dalit, Caste, Poverty, Discrimination, Ambedkar***

I. INTRODUCTION

Indian society was divided by *Manusmriti* into four classes: *Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya,* and *Shudras* based on the principle of graded inequality. Outside the order existed the *Avarna* class of *Asparshya, Chandal, Antya,* untouchables who are considered polluted and impure and forced to do filthy occupations of skinning animals and manual scavenging. Hence, untouchables spent their lives outside the village and lived under stigma and humiliation. They are not considered part of Indian society. Therefore, Dr. Ambedkar argued in one of speech "The *Chaturvarnya* must be rooted out. The principle that privileges for the higher classes and poverty for the lower classes must end now" (86). Because "it is not just division of labour, it is the division of labourers which reduced Dalits to subhuman and deprived them of the right to choose their profession freely. It was challenged by anti-caste thinkers such as Buddha, Ravidas, Kabir, Phule, Periyar and Ambedkar who worked to establish a democratic society based on the principles of Equality, liberty and fraternity. Their struggle culminated with the foundation of constitutional democracy in 1950, which promised a better future for Dalits. It has been seventy-eight years, but the violence and atrocities against them are still going on. In 2023, more than fifty thousand cases were filed under the SC/ST Act, and the Dalit community is still forced to live their life in a wretched state of slavery.

Suraj Yengde is a Dalit writer who significantly contributed to the scholarship of Caste. He has published two books: *Caste Matters* and *Caste: A Global Story,* which study caste and its harmful impacts on Indian society. His life journey is full of challenging experiences and inspiring moments. He is currently working as an assistant professor at the University of Pennsylvania. He was born in the Madiga caste, which is considered impure and lowest in the Indian social order. His family's economic condition was also not good. For survival, they had to do caste work of cleaning at the upper-caste people's homes. They had "no agricultural land, colour TV or fridge and our income level was as low as it could be as my father was bedridden (health reasons meant he remained unemployed for most of our lives). He did not own a house". Their cottage has an iron tin roof which leaks during the rain. He narrates:

> Taking me into her cushy arms, my aai (paternal grandmother) was reminding me of the importance of my presence in her life. 'My dearest maajhya baalla, you

> are so full of life. You've the best eyes. You've so many qualities that I can barely count them.' Her darkened face and frail skin glow in the night, the cheapest light bulb in the market—known as 'zero-power bulb', which truly was a lightless bulb—the only source of light in the room, was switched off. She was consoling me in the room the size of a Toyota Minibus that I shared with her, my mother, father, sister and brother. (1)

His birth brought hope in their lives. Despite being born in a poor Dalit family, he never became negative and lost hope for a better future. He worked hard and completed his higher studies at Harvard and Cambridge. He reflects about his old days:

> I worked on groundnut soil in the fertile region of Vidarbha, accompanying my mother's family; I worked as a manager overseeing my father's newspaper; I worked as a helper to a truck driver; I worked in a warehouse, all in my attempt to make ends meet. I did all this before I reached puberty. My family continued to live in the shared house with one room and a kitchen. (4)

So, he did multiple jobs to make both ends meet. Like him, many Dalit children are deprived of normal life, forced by circumstances to labour under poor conditions. By recalling the memories, he brings attention to the condition of his Basti. It is a neglected and separated ghetto where politicians come once in five years to beg for votes only. So Dalitwadas remain unattended by the government. He recounts:

> Our area was seen by local authorities as despicable, hence it seldom received services of cleanliness and care. Outside each house was a dirty canal that carried faeces in the open, and flies hovering the dirt would often find their way into our house and kitchen. The canal was uncovered and shallow. More often than not, one of the flies would end up in the food we had to consume. Children would be crawling on the streets while their parents worked, flies hovering around their mouths. (5)

Dalits have been forced to live on the periphery of the village as their presence is seen as impure and they are looked upon with hatred. In the modern day, Dalit Bastis are situated outside of the villages and still denied the basic facilities of water, land, and other services due to the partiality of the governing machinery. Yengde grew up in that atmosphere in the poor and unhealthy conditions:

> In the Dalit basti where I grew up in Nanded, Maharashtra, there were at least three married women who immolated themselves. Many young students, owing to their mental condition, could not cope with the pressures and thus gave up education. Fathers who had a traumatized childhood found refuge in alcohol. The childhood friends with whom I grew up are now counted in the ranks of criminals. The difference between them and me: their parents and the family condition they were in did not accord them the same opportunity that my parents could offer me. Their parents were drunkards, and would constantly beat their children. Amidst such an environment, many turned to drugs at an early age. (52)

Jotiba Phule discussed the reason for the misery of Shudra and At-Shudras in his book *Cultivator's Whipcord* in which he writes that "Without knowledge, intelligence was lost, without intelligence morality was lost, and without morality was lost all dynamism! Without dynamism money was lost and without money the shudras sank. All this misery was caused by the lack of knowledge." Most of the Dalit children are not guided properly because of the illiteracy of their parents and poor economic support. As a result of it, they fall into the wrong. In his memoir, Yengde speaks about his childhood friend who could have led a greater life if he had had parental care and the right guidance. He asserts:

> One of my friends, Avi, was a cricket star and the captain of my team. People admired him for his sportsmanship. Without any proper coaching or parental support, in no time Avi started playing cricket matches for money and not as a sport. His madness for money turned him into an avid gambler. He played lotteries and other sports dealing with money. Soon, he started smoking ganja and taking pills to get high, and alcohol became his best friend. Today, when I see Avi, he hides from me. He doesn't have the courage to face me. A smart and beautiful Dalit child is now on the verge of being imprisoned. (53)

Due to a lack of proper education and guidance, Dalit Children go through trials and tribulations in a casteist society. Caste is pervasive and has harmful impacts on Dalit lives. Like one day Yengde went to a shop to buy bubble gum, but there he was made to feel about his low caste status. The shopkeeper "made it clear through his tone that an Untouchable yelling in front of the shop would dissuade goddess Lakshmi. So he loudly insulted me with his crass voice, calling me names" (226). He felt anger at that time, but he could not do anything. Shopkeeper glared him with contempt at that time. In school also, he is pointed out as an outcaste and mistreated due to his poor Dalit background:

> In school I was humiliated for not paying fees on time. The clerk, Tony, would visit the classroom every quarter and call out my name, asking me to stand up. Once I did, he would read out how many months of fees were pending. The higher the number, the more the embarrassment. My classmates added shame to that embarrassment by quietly staring at me in disgust. This was a regular occurrence. Every time Tony came to class, I wanted to leave school and join the hustlers in my slum; they made money and lived as they wanted, without relying on anyone's disrespect to get through the hustle called life. (2)

He feels a "cosmo-caste" atmosphere in school where children from every caste study. There are five Dalit students in the class of sixty children. He recalls his days when his "tiffin had a chapatti and cooked methi bhaji (fenugreek leaves) and not butter sandwiches or cutlets. I had probably not eaten butter more than six to ten times till high school." He faced the very first instance of caste humiliation and discrimination when he went to upper-caste homes for work with his grandmother. He recalls:

> An incident with my maternal grandmother, Sarubai Maay, who was a maid in the house of a Bania. She avoided taking her grandchildren to work for fear of exposing her pitiful life. One day, as a curious ten-year-old, I insisted and followed her to see where she worked. She was mortified upon learning that I was there, watching her clean a toilet. I suddenly got the urge to pee. Initially, she was hesitant for me to use the facility. But seeing a ten-year-old in pain melted her heart. She did the unthinkable. She allowed me to use the bathroom of the maliks that was placed outside their luxurious house for the use of visitors. During the course of my less-than-40-second stay in the bathroom, I could see my grandmother moving side to side in anxiety, as if to caution me to come out before anyone from the house spotted me. (15)

Grandmother is terribly afraid of upper-caste owners because they would object to the use of the washroom. In the very next moment, the Swarna women saw Yengde near the washroom, and she started abusing Amma. At that moment, he felt what it is to be a Dalit:

> I felt very vulnerable and insecure. I crouched, trying to hide my face. This incident brought home to me my beingness as a Dalit. The behaviour of this person who yelled nasty and derogatory comments upon the suspicion that a ten-year-old Dalit boy, the grandson of their maid, had used a bathroom on the fringe of their house was unacceptable. I was lesser than the bathroom that was a receptacle of shit. I did not know what I was to imagine. Is there a lexicon that gathers the experiences of such an unexplainable act? I am yet to find it. It remains the marked tattoo that I carry unwillingly—that is why caste matters. (16)

Caste has destroyed the sense of brotherhood and killed the public conscience. Dr. Ambedkar says in his speech "Annihilation of Caste" that "Caste has killed public spirit. Caste has destroyed the sense of public charity. Caste has made public opinion impossible. A Hindu's public is his caste. His responsibility is only to his caste". Caste creates the feeling of enmity among fellow human beings. With the migration of Indians to foreign countries, caste has now become a global phenomenon. Yengde finds that caste is present everywhere. In Harvard, where students are assumed to be well-educated and have scientific aptitude, they behave like rigid Brahmins. He writes:

> In the Harvard Kennedy School yard, I bump into Indian students who join my table during luncheon hours. After pleasantries and introductions, they inquire about my research. I blurt out, 'I study the caste system.' 'Nice. Do you study caste here (US) or in India?' Deepan, a mid-career bureaucrat, asks. I reply that I study it in both regions.

> Deepan gets interested and asks more questions but his aim is actually to find out my caste. (255)

Caste is a notion that has been deeply rooted in the psyche of Indian people. In the United Kingdom during his studies, he interacts with Indian students after knowing his work on caste. They started keeping distance from him. In this context, Dr. Ambedkar argues in his speech *Annihilation of Caste* that "Caste is a notion, it is a state of the mind" (68). Yengde suffered humiliation when he unveiled his Dalit identity before his friends:

> One day, I was invited to spend an evening at the house of an Indian friend. As I entered, I sensed hostility in the air. No one wanted to engage with me. They looked away when I spoke, and when they did respond to anything I said it was loud and forceful. I was mobbed with virile attacks on my dignity and community. The community backgrounds of these students ranged from Hindu Bania and Sindhi to Sikh, Brahmin and Jain. None of them could bear my Dalit assertion. They started calling me names, degrading Ambedkar. (43)

Casteist slurs and abuses are used as a method to deprive Dalits of their dignity by higher caste people. For Swarnas, it is not appropriate to bear the presence of the untouchable because they are considered polluted. Om Parkash Valmiki in his book *Aesthetics of Dalit Literature* states that "Dalit authors have to fight on two fronts at a time. Firstly, with the slums and ghettos enveloped in their abject poverty and with darkness prevailing inside them and, secondly, with the system outside of this Dalit life that has diluted this poison in life, giving birth to social disparities and discrimination" (84). Thus, Yengde is fighting two battles: one with poverty and the second with the caste system.

CONCLUSION

Dalit autobiographies and memoirs explore the lives of subalterns who are denied equality and liberty in social, economic, and political spheres. The paper uncovers the harsh realities that Suraj Yengde and his community face. He used education as a weapon to liberate himself and resist the hegemonic structural violence with courage. The problem of Dalits is primarily social in nature, but they are deprived economically as well. Suraj Yengde faced discrimination, segregation, and humiliation in public spaces due to his caste. He was treated as a secondary being by his classmates and colleagues in school and university. . While adopting the Ambedkarite vision, his family became his strength and always pushed him to get the best education from Oxford and Cambridge. He contributed to Dalit studies by challenging and exposing caste through his writings. Dalit community was forced to live their life thoroughly in a wretched state of utter poverty.

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